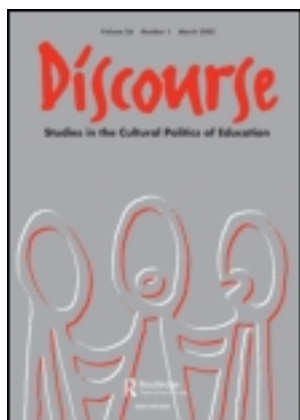


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Taking context seriously: towards explaining policy enactments in the secondary school

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PAPER 1

Taking context seriously: towards explaining policy enactments in the secondary school

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This first paper in the series concentrates on school context and outlines a framework which identifies and relates a variety of factors that influence differences in policy enactments between similar schools. In taking context seriously in our four case-study schools we argue that policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making, these sorts of constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected. This paper considers aspects such as school intake, history, staffing, school ethos and culture, 'material' elements like buildings, resources and budgets, as well as external environments. These factors are conceptualised as situated, material, professional and external dimensions and we aim to present a grounded exploration of the localised nature of policy actions that is more 'real' and realistic than that often assumed by policy making.

Keywords: secondary schools; policy enactment; policy making; school context

This paper outlines a framework which identifies and relates a variety of factors that influence differences in policy enactments between similar schools, concentrating on the role of school context. In this way, it explores a means by which to draw together four main issues that lie at the centre of the Policy Enactments research project: the localised nature of policy actions, the presence of many overlapping policies in schools, and the role of policy actors and resource limitations. By taking context seriously we argue that policies are intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making and research, these sorts of constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected. This paper considers aspects such as school intake, history, staffing, school ethos and culture, as well as 'material' elements like buildings, resources and budgets, and external environments such as local authority relations and pressures from league tables and national bodies such as Ofsted.¹ Conceptualising these factors as situated, material, professional and external dimensions, we examine the role of context in shaping policy enactments on the ground.

Policy and policy enactment – background

Since 'policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed,

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or particular goals or outcomes are set' (Ball, 1994, p. 19), putting policies into practice is a creative, sophisticated and complex but also constrained process. In much writing on school reform and school improvement, the meaning of policy is taken for granted and seen unproblematically as an attempt to 'solve a problem', generally through the production of policy texts such as legislation or other nationally driven insertions into practice. In contrast, we understand policy as a process, as diversely and repeatedly contested and/or subject to 'interpretation' as it is enacted (rather than implemented) in original and creative ways within institutions and classrooms (see also Ball, 1994, 2008). Whilst from the 'outside' a school may look like it is straightforwardly adopting a number of policies, schools have different capacities for 'coping' with policy and assembling school-based policy responses. Schools produce, to some extent, their own 'take' on a policy, drawing on aspects of their culture or ethos, as well as on situated necessities (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010) within the limitations and possibilities of context(s).

Policy is complexly encoded in sets of texts and various documents and it is also decoded in complex ways. Policy enactment involves creative processes of interpretation and translation, that is, the recontextualisation – through reading, writing and talking – of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices. For example, part of our analytical approach towards what happens in schools in relation to policy is based on a perspective that locates teachers and other education workers as key actors in the policy process and part of our theoretical endeavour is the challenge to conceptualise being both an agent and a subject of policy enactments (see Papers 3 and 4 in this series). Furthermore, what happens inside a school in terms of how policies are interpreted and enacted will be mediated by institutionally determined factors – the contextual dimensions that are the concern of this paper.

The form and extent of enactment depends on whether a policy is mandated, strongly recommended or suggested (Wallace, 1991), as well as the degree to which particular policies 'fit' with the ethos and culture of the school (two different things). That is, enactment is also mediated by what Riseborough (1992) has termed 'secondary adjustments', in that policies can be either 'contained' or 'disruptive' in schools. They can be fitted in without initiating any major or real changes and/or they can produce radical and sometimes unintended outcomes. The way that policy problems are solved in context is a multifaceted, iterative process. The rich 'underlife' and micropolitics of individual schools means that policies will be differently interpreted (or 'read'), and differently worked into and against current practices, sometimes simultaneously. They may be subject to 'creative non-implementation' (Ball, 1994, p. 20) and/or 'fabrication', where policy responses are incorporated in school documentation for accountability reasons, rather than for reasons of pedagogic or organisational change (Ball, 2001). Policies may be diluted and they may sometimes just peter out (Maguire, 2007) and where they get superficially mapped on to current practices, any innovatory potential may simply be ignored (Spillane, 2004).

Policies also enter different resource environments; schools have particular histories, buildings and infrastructures, staffing profiles, leadership experiences, budgetary situations and teaching and learning challenges (e.g. proportions of children with special educational needs, English as an additional language (EAL), behavioural difficulties, 'disabilities', and social and economic 'deprivations'). This paper attempts to offer a framework through which to incorporate these concerns

into educational policy analysis, not as a comprehensive model, but as a heuristic device to encourage investigation and questioning.

Locating policy processes

Attempts to theorise *what* happens when policy enters the varied enactment environments of schools go back some way. For example, Malen and Knapp (1997) considered a 'multiple perspectives' approach to education policy analysis and developed a 'conceptual map' on which to chart policy purposes and processes. Their framework, which incorporates five dimensions – rational, organisational, political, symbolic and normative perspectives of education policy – serves as a 'roadmap' to plot the (at times tenuous) connections between policy and practice. They provide a useful reminder that any linear policy story of rational perspectives that considers policy as a straightforward response to a 'problem' where the plan of action is based on a rational choice, value-maximising, 'optimal' solution, is just one account of policy and one that is possibly deeply flawed. Malen and Knapp suggest that organisational perspectives (i.e. issues of organisational survival and security, as well as established structures, habits and routines) may be just as valid as an explanation for the way policy processes are played out in practice. Also, political perspectives in turn emphasise power dynamics where policy is the outcome of interest-based competing priorities that are negotiated, bargained and compromised over. Malen and Knapp remind us that policy also has a symbolic dimension where policy 'sends signals and creates symbols that serve important functions' and where the focus is on 'the "messages" and "meanings" of policy' (1997, p. 430). Finally, normative policy perspectives – present in many of the above dimensions – highlight the relationship between social values and public policies and remind us that policy always reflects social values. This list of 'perspectives' illustrates the complexity and multifariousness of the policy process but also fails to capture the ways in which the rational, organisational, political, symbolic and normative are messily intertwined in 'policy work' in schools.

It also neglects the particularities of policy enactment environments. Not all schools are the same and even in superficially 'similar' schools, as with our sample, the 'nuances of local context [can] cumulatively make a considerable difference to school processes and student achievement' (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 309). Lupton (2004), in a study of four disadvantaged schools in poor areas of England which considers student intake, school and area characteristics of the case-study schools, calls for 'contextualised policy responses' that avoid generic measures and are not just adapted to disadvantaged areas, but are also sensitive to differences between these areas. Studies that foreground contexts in this way are surprisingly rare in education and policy studies. Whilst a concern with context is central to, for example, social anthropology (Dille, 1999), in educational research 'context has often appeared, if at all, as a general background which functions to set the scene so that the real drama can unfold in the subsequent account of particular people and events' (Gilbert, 1992, p. 39). These days, school improvement and school effectiveness research increasingly emphasise their concern with school contexts. However, as Thrupp and Lupton (2006) observe, there still tends to be much more focus on schools' differential internal organisation and practice (aspects such as leadership and pedagogy), than on diverse 'external' contexts. Acknowledging the

latter demands greater social complexity of analysis and recognises that ‘effective management and teaching in one context is not the same as effective management and teaching in another’ (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 312). Even nuanced studies such as Lupton’s, rarely mention some of the most ‘material’ of contexts – the buildings and budgets, available technologies and local infrastructures. Addressing these concerns, in this paper we mean to provide a grounded account of how context shapes policy enactments and thus to relate together and theorise interpretative, material and contextual dimensions of the policy process.

The importance of context

As argued above, policies are enacted in material conditions, with varying resources, in relation to particular ‘problems’. They are set against and alongside existing commitments, values and forms of experience. In other words, a framework for policy enactment will need to consider a set of objective conditions in relation to a set of subjective ‘interpretational’ dynamics and thus acknowledge that the material, structural and relational are part of policy analysis in order to make better sense of policy enactments at the institutional level. In what follows, we will be using data from our case-study research in four schools (see Introduction to this series of papers) to explore these dynamics of context and their interrelationships. We are conceptualising and grouping these as *situated*, *professional*, *material* and *external* contexts (see text box below) but these aspects can overlap and are interconnected. For example, school intake is presented as ‘situated’, but intake in turn can shape professional factors such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, as well as ‘policy management’.

Contextual dimensions

- *Situated* contexts (such as locale, school histories, intakes and settings).
- *Professional* contexts (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, and ‘policy management’ in schools).
- *Material* contexts (e.g. staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure).
- *External* contexts (e.g. degree and quality of local authority support, pressures and expectations from broader policy context, such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities).

Situated contexts

Situated factors refer to those aspects of context that are historically and locationally linked to the school, such as a school’s setting, its history and intake. Location and intake are of course interrelated. Our inner-city case-study school (Atwood), for example, has a multi-ethnic, socially mixed student body that reflects the diversity of its catchment area. One of the outer London schools (George Eliot) is located in an area where students of South Asian backgrounds make up the majority of the school’s student population. The other suburban school (Wesley) is ethnically more

diverse, but in this case locality shapes intake in relation to other nearby schools that are perceived to be academically 'stronger', casting our school as a destination for the 'less academic' children in the area. The school in the county town (Campion) is located in a white, lower middle- and working-class neighbourhood and this is reflected in their student intake. The proportions of students on free school meals (FSM) in the four schools correspond with the levels of poverty in their respective locations; the FSM percentages in the two suburban schools are broadly in line with the national average,² in the county school FSM is lower and in the inner-city case-study school the percentage of FSM students is roughly twice the national average.

Throughout the fieldwork, in both interviews and during observations, there was a frequent voicing of sentiments that referred to 'students like ours'. Schools can become defined by their intake, but they also define themselves by it. Members of school communities construct stories about their school that are based on their experiences but also on some broader generalisations. For George Eliot school, the story of a predominantly South Asian intake has been linked to its specialism (business and enterprise), with the senior leadership team (SLT) arguing that this 'tailors the curriculum offer to what the parents and students of this community want' (Justin, George Eliot, Deputy Head). They also offered specific English GCSE interventions for second-generation EAL students. There were other activities that took account of perceived student preferences or needs but also stereotyped the student body: '[O]ur kids love sport ... they're cricket crazy, rounders, which is a reflection of the intake' (Rachael, George Eliot, Head of Physical Education). In addition, these 'internal' perceptions were reinforced by messages from the 'outside'. Following an Ofsted inspection which commented that female students – and given the predominant composition of the school, Asian female students – do not participate enough in class activities, the school was looking into measures to raise levels of what they (and Ofsted) see as 'active' involvement:

I'm looking at group work within schools and how to ... how to improve group work ... because in our school, one of the things that Ofsted raised was the fact that we've got – some of our female students they don't involve themselves in lessons as much. So they're like ghosts or shadows, they're there but they're not necessarily actually actively involved in discussions, group work and so on. (Aabid, George Eliot, Sociology teacher)

Feminist academics have expressed concern about a recent, apparently uncontested, re-emergence of gender-stereotyping as an accepted aspect of pedagogy (Skelton & Francis, 2009; Youdell, 2006) and there have been other criticisms of the representation of 'Asian' students as timid (Connolly, 1998; Skelton & Francis, 2003). At the same time, it is hard to see how schools could distance themselves from the imperatives of powerful audit systems like Ofsted.

Another of our case-study schools – Campion – has developed an institutional narrative that centres around its intake being comprised of white, working-class students from relatively well-off family backgrounds who are not academically motivated:

[W]e have a sort of strange sort of middle-class affluence that's actually largely not based around academic success. And I think culturally that's created quite an interesting sort of melting pot, that we have, sort of, you know, plumbers' sons, for example, and things like that, builders' sons. Pretty affluent, you know, they don't lack for anything,

these kids, they've all got mobile phones, they've all got iPods, they've all got PSPs [portable play stations], you know, they've got everything they want . . . But, like I say, I don't think most of their parents' success has been built around academic success, so I don't think there's a culture of needing – seeing the necessity to succeed at school to be successful. (Gareth, *Campion*, Sixth Form Deputy)

Campion is perhaps the school in our sample that is struggling hardest to keep within national averages for its GCSE results and it is investing enormous amounts of effort and resources into policy interventions and innovations (see Braun et al., 2010). These efforts notwithstanding, results remain stubbornly modest. Teachers' disappointment at this lack of progress is palpable: 'I mean, we're working our socks off, we're one of the hardest-working schools around the area, but how is it that other schools are doing far better results-wise than we are?' (Anjali, *Campion*, Key Stage 4 manager). One way of coping with such frustrations is to seek for explanations that are external to the school – the characteristics of the intake – and so Anjali concludes that even though there is a culture within the school that strongly emphasises helping students to succeed 'It's just we don't have enough [students] coming to us [asking for help]'.

These examples drawn from two of the case-study schools are not meant to criticise schools for potentially stereotyping their students, rather, we intend to illustrate that context is an 'active' force, it is not just a backdrop against which schools have to operate, it initiates dynamic policy processes and choices and is continuously constructed and developed both from within and externally in relation to policy imperatives and expectations.

As school intake 'drives' results (Gibson & Asthana, 1998), schools' policy eye is trained on the challenges – and opportunities – their student intake pose. Atwood, our inner-city case-study school, has a socially mixed catchment area and attracting and retaining middle-class students is one of the policy drivers in the school. For example, when an analysis of the school's exam results showed girls from more middle-class backgrounds were 'underachieving' compared to their predicted grades, a girls' group was set up specifically targeting this set of students, with the aim to foster self-esteem and raise enjoyment of school for the participants, and efforts were made to get teachers to be more aware of the participation of girls in their lessons. Efforts which also signal to (middle-class) parents that they have made the 'right' decision to send their children to the school and that girls are expected by the school to do well academically.

Schools' histories, and bound up in this, their reputations, are another aspect of context that is alive within the collective consciousness of schools. In *Wesley* school, for example, a 'blip' in behaviour standards among some students around 10 years ago has had serious effects on the way the school has been perceived within the local community ever since. The school is still fighting against this negative and by now outdated reputation:

[I]n many ways our kids are more focused, the quality of staff is better, statistically speaking, you know, the results are [better] . . . But, in spite of that, the standing in the local community, it's not as high now as it was 20 years ago . . . We hit a bit of a rough patch, between about six and 10 years ago, the school lost its way a bit. And the behaviour, whilst it was never bad, it did deteriorate. And in those days we let our kids go out at lunchtime and there were a few incidents on the high street. And I think, yeah, you know, that helped to lessen our standing in the local community. (James, *Wesley*, Assistant Head)

Wesley's policy response was to forbid students to leave the school during the lunch hour. They have also introduced increasingly strict uniform requirements, for example, Sixth Form students are required to wear 'business suits'. From the discussion so far, we can already observe interrelationships and movement between different aspects of context. There are intersections of external policy drivers (schools' reputations and competition with other schools) with internal factors and institutional policy dynamics and priorities and between policy 'values' and the 'valuing' of different sorts of students.

Professional contexts

Professional dimensions refer to somewhat less tangible 'context' variables than those described above. We are interested here in examining teachers' values and commitments and experiences and policy management within schools, asking whether and how they feed into policy enactments. We should also point out that for the purpose of this paper, we will not be looking at the influence of leadership and leaders within the school. Other policy theories often emphasise the role of leadership (e.g. Spillane, 2004) and we have written about the role of 'policy entrepreneurs' in shaping schools' policy responses (see Paper 4 in this series). However, this paper is attempting to cast a wider net than the headteacher or specific individuals alone, in emphasising broad professional contexts.

Atwood is an interesting example of a school with a distinct set of professional outlooks and attitudes that make certain policy responses more or less possible. In the interview extract below, a Future Leader³ with a residency at the school explains her understanding of the school's ethos and culture and how this influences its take on uniform and behaviour policy:

And I think [Atwood] really prides itself [inaudible] the governors and parents on this freedom of expression that it has as a school. So linking into the arts college but also parents, governors, really proud of the fact that, you know, kids do wear non-uniform, they do have the chance to express themselves, they don't see it as a traditional school and they – and people seem quite resistant to the idea of it ever becoming more of a uniformed establishment. I think with that, again from an outsider's point of view, sometimes I think there's an element of too much freedom in that where do you draw the line then when it comes to behaviour and where are your – where are your boundaries. And I think that's where sometimes the policies seem to fall down a little bit. (Heather, Atwood, Future Leader)

As we can see, there are strong interdependencies between professional values, intake, and what and how policies are pursued. These relationships are not always smooth. There are potential dissonances between embedded institutional values and national policy trends, such as an emphasis by government on uniform in schools (Department of Children & Family Services, 2007). However, the extract also illustrates that professional context is not necessarily coherent and uncontested within schools. For example, Heather (above), in contrast to many of her colleagues, would welcome uniform and greater emphasis on discipline over freedom of expression at Atwood. In another example, Paul, a head of department at Wesley, was critical of his headteacher's failure to acknowledge the increased diversity of the

student body and wished for a policy response that emphasises cultural diversity and inclusion:

The other issue is about things like bringing in and building an identity of the school. And also recognising the different identities within the school. So, for example, the Head will get hung up about black boys' achievement but he won't necessarily focus on things like the multicultural aspect of the school or recognising that there are students who are from different cultures and different faiths and so on and whatever and actually highlight that and make a more inclusive school in that way. (Paul, Wesley, Head of English)

As policy actors we are always positioned, the policy activities we see and how we understand them is dependent on 'where' we are. An obvious contrast would be to compare a member of the leadership team with a newly qualified teacher (NQT). Few policies have relevance to everyone, and it was striking – although not unexpected – that the NQTs in our case-study schools generally reported department-centred understandings of contextual factors: 'I mean, the maths department has quite good policies [around behaviour] but they are departmental rather than school-wide' (Eric, Atwood, NQT) (see also Paper 4). When referring to context, one may assume that this refers to the whole school, yet departments can operate, at least some of the time, as fairly autonomous units. New teachers or teachers in large departments may work with reference mainly to their immediate colleagues and departmental contexts and policies. Sometimes professional frames of reference can be even more arbitrary. In the case of part-time teachers, for example, which days of the week a teacher is working may determine whether they get hold of policy information or not. Naomi, who teaches part-time at Atwood, reckons that the fact that she is working the earlier part of the week means she knows more about policy developments than her part-time colleagues working on other days: 'I think if Monday wasn't my day in school I probably wouldn't [find out much] because Monday tends to be INSET [in-service training] day . . . and we have a staff briefing every Monday' (Naomi, Atwood, Religious Education teacher).

Such tangible yet random factors lead us to our next area of context exploration, material factors and their impact and influence in shaping policy enactments.

Material contexts

Material context refers to the 'physical' aspects of a school: buildings and budgets, but also to levels of staffing, available technologies and surrounding infrastructure. Buildings, their layout, quality and spaciousness can have considerable impact on policy enactments on the ground. Schools operating across two sites, for example, may well have different capacities for enactment in each setting. Champion school teaches its six formers at a separate site around the corner from the main school building and the physical distance means that many policy programmes that the school pursues can become neglected in the off-site location:

[W]e don't have a very strong SLT presence down here [at the Sixth Form centre]. In fact we barely have one at all, and so all the things that are being focused on on the main site, you know, so there's one member of SLT who's chasing up who's doing their homework, there's another one who's chasing up, you know, teaching and learning, Assessment for

Learning. We don't have those pressures down here. And, of course, you know, what that means is I think people are feeling under a lot of pressure to do the right things up there and they come down here and it's a bit of a kind of, 'Right, I don't have to put my learning objectives up because I'm down the Sixth Form and no one's going to come in and see that they're not up there', or, 'I don't need to worry about setting that homework', you know. (Gareth, Campion, Sixth Form Deputy)

When it comes to buildings, our four case-study schools operate in very different contexts. George Eliot is a PFI (Private Finance Initiative) Building Schools for the Future (BSF) school with all the advantages and drawbacks that come with a new design and build. The school has very good internet and computer access throughout and is arranged in separate buildings over a generous area. Whilst this allows, for example, the art block to put their distinctive stamp on 'their' building, it also means that there is less interaction with colleagues from other departments. Central features, such as a shared staff room, are used less often. The other three schools operate with a greater mix of older and newer buildings. Campion's 1970s buildings present serious problems of wear and tear and their associated repair and energy costs. Some older buildings at Atwood and Wesley school pose problems of capacity and overcrowding. Wesley, for example, has a science block that is outmoded and in poor repair, but it also has a new state-of-the-art theatre, so different areas of the school offer learning environments of widely different quality. In Atwood, narrow staircases and corridors present problems for students entering and moving through the school, which, in turn, can have knock on effects on behaviour management.

School budgets are perhaps the most 'material' of the contextual factors. Although school funding is primarily driven by student numbers, differences in school size, local authority subsidies and location (e.g. inner-city versus county funding formulas), can mean considerable differences in overall budgets. As one of the SLT members at Wesley pointed out: 'If the school was a mile or two in that direction we would be on a totally different scale of finance because, you know, the inner London boroughs get so much more than we do' (Hazel, Wesley, Deputy Head). Across our case-study schools, total annual incomes vary widely. George Eliot, for example, receives roughly twice the amount of money Campion school does (£10 million versus £5 million). Whilst the former also has to provide for around 500 more students, economies of scale, as well as employing more non-teaching staff in roles that are held by teachers in other schools, means that George Eliot spends a significantly smaller proportion of its income on staff costs compared to Campion (78% versus 83%) – which translates into around £500,000 a year. Reserves also differed considerably (and accordingly), with George Eliot holding by far the largest savings out of the four schools. Being able to draw on savings, as well as larger budget amounts not tied up in staff costs, has policy consequences. George Eliot, for example, has been able to financially support a 'thinking skills' intervention programme across the school to a generous extent and the school regularly hires external facilitators for their INSET days.

Staffing is of course not just a cost, but staff is in the first – and last – instance a school's main asset, as one of the deputies at George Eliot points out:

And 50 – I mean, I keep saying – 50 interventions from the SLT, the leadership team, count for having one decent head of department ... And we've found that as soon as we

appointed a good person in one area you can almost, sort of, you know, let it – it'll run itself. (Justin, George Eliot, Deputy Head)

Attracting and keeping 'good' teachers and other staff was a main concern for all of the schools and a particular challenge in some subject areas. The Head of Mathematics at Wesley, for example, described how in spite of receiving over 50 applications for a position and having interviewed six initially promising candidates, she ended up not filling the post. Geographic location, cost of housing for teachers, and transport infrastructure can also impact on staffing and the calibre of applicants. One of our suburban case-study schools, for instance, was poorly served by public transport but was still in an area affected by London rush-hour traffic, making it a difficult school to get to.

External contexts

The last contextual dimension we want to discuss briefly in this paper is external contexts. Here we are thinking of aspects such as pressures and expectations from broader local and national policy matters such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, and legal requirements and responsibilities, as well as the degree and quality of local authority support and relationships with other schools.

The pressures of Ofsted and exam results were mentioned by interviewees throughout the fieldwork, this preoccupation reflecting the centrality of such performative and audit mechanisms in initiating and shaping particular rafts of policy. Below, a Wesley SLT member recounts how a by now 'old' Ofsted report profoundly changed the school's practices and its self-perception:

And as a school, historically, we'd ... I mean, when I joined the school it was very clearly a coasting school and it was very difficult to turn things around. We'd got a lot of established staff who were of the opinion that we were a good school ... We then had an Ofsted in [2002] ... which came as an absolute shock to a lot of staff ... They couldn't believe that we weren't a good school, that we were ... an underachieving school. And that was a, you know, it was a really good thing that we had that Ofsted report because it did challenge those perceptions, it did enable us to really start moving things forward. (Hazel, Wesley, Deputy Head)

League table positions, both locally and nationally, form a constant backdrop to policy accounts within the schools. Wesley, for example, is located in a very high-achieving local authority and there is constant comparison with surrounding schools: 'The league tables: even though our results are by national standards above average they're below average for [the local authority]' (James, Wesley, Assistant Head). Local authority context and support can be another policy enactment factor which gets overlooked in many policy accounts. For instance, the headteachers at both Campion and Wesley school expressed frustration with a lack of financial support from their authorities to improve their buildings and thus not being able to address what they felt were urgent issues with the infrastructure of their schools. At the same time, teachers in both Atwood and Wesley were very positive about the information and support they received from local authority subject and behaviour advisors. Campion had a more ambiguous relationship with its local authority, they co-operated closely on some policy developments such as PLTS (Pupil Learning and

Thinking Skills; see Braun et al., 2010), but as a school that struggled to achieve its targeted exam results, it also often felt the punitive and auditorial side of the local authority.

The contexts of 'real' schools – summing up

Context is of course always specific. It is also dynamic and shifting, both within and outside of schools. A school may undergo changes in its teaching body and/or capacity, attitude and make-up of its staff group. Student intake may also shift, although this is perhaps more likely in urban environments where there is higher student mobility and the catchment area's social composition can change. In the course of the fieldwork, we have become alerted to the prominence of context in many of the case-study schools' policy decisions and activities, but we have also been struck by the absence of some contextual aspects we were expecting. Schools' specialisms, for example, played a negligible role in interviewees' accounts of the schools.

The motivation for this paper has been to take context seriously and whilst we have tried to capture a full range of contextual factors, such a list can never be exhaustive. We have not provided a complete or 'finished' analysis, nor comprehensive 'coverage' of the four schools, even if this were possible, but rather offered a heuristic device that is intended to stimulate interest and to ask questions about the circumstances of policy enactments in 'real' schools. The 'materiality' of policy can get neglected. Schools enact policies in circumstances not always of their own choosing; policies literally move through different spaces, such as the narrow staircases of Atwood school. Policy analyses of schools rarely, if ever, include details of budgets, buildings or staffing in their purviews and contexts are magically dematerialised in the way that schools are represented and 'interpretations' explained. Policy-making and policy-makers tend to assume 'best possible' environments for 'implementation': ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources. In this paper we have attempted to disrupt this idealism by introducing the 'reality' of our case-study schools, with their situated and material contexts, their specific professional resources and challenges, and their different external pressures and supports.

Notes

1. The English school inspectorate.
2. In 2010 in state-funded English secondary schools, 15.4% of pupils were known to be eligible for FSM (retrieved December 1, 2010, from www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000925/index.shtml).
3. Future Leaders is leadership training programme targeted at urban schools (see www.future-leaders.org.uk).

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